

[1874-1911]

THE OLD SOCIETY

not now possible for field work to supply the gaps in the written material.⁷²

The traditional kinship system had neither clans nor segmenting lineages. The patrilineal group (*oluse*) was localized in a village, the group head being at the same time a village headman. Patrilineal ties do not seem to have been recognized between villages.⁷³ This social independence of the agnatically united village was reflected in the surrounding palisade, in the close clustering of the houses (nowadays much more spread out) and in the village institutions of the dancing-floor and the men's house (*ondjango*). It was here that all the men and boys, from seven or eight up, etc. Hastings writes, 'Each woman, after preparing the meal, takes or sends the portion which is for the male members of her family. This food is common property. As soon as enough has arrived some responsible member among the men will have it divided among the boys. For days a man may never taste of the food which is prepared by his wife.'⁷⁴ The men's house was also a club, and a court-room, where minor cases were decided. It was through this localized body of patrikin that an individual claimed land and residence rights and through it that he participated in the political system.⁷⁵

The matrilineal group (the *oluina*) was composed of the descendants of a common great-great-grandmother.⁷⁶ According to Childs, it had a head who might also at times be a village headman,⁷⁷ and it was presumably the matrilineal group head who settled the disputes over property which Hambly says

⁷² For an attempt at reconstructing Umbundu kinship on the basis of Childs's book see J. A. Barnes's review of *Umbundu Kinship and Character* in *Man*, 1950, pp. 126-128. It may be mentioned that the terms 'the side of the bow' and 'the side of the basket' are used simply to mean 'patrilineal kin' and 'matrilineal kin' (Dr. Childs, private information, and my own inquiries).

⁷³ A rather ambiguous phrase in Childs p. 43 ('The *oluse* consists of a large number of local village groups'), which might be interpreted as meaning that villages were patrilineally grouped into clans, seems really to mean simply that the village is the *oluse* unit.

⁷⁴ Hastings, p. 77.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16. Childs, pp. 43-44.

⁷⁶ Hastings, p. 83, states that the matrilineal group consists of the descendants of a common great-great-grandmother (that is, five generations), and on p. 91 says that it consists of a group 'linked by a common great-great-grandmother'.

⁷⁷ Childs, p. 44.

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 did not eat or chat with his eldest son or his daughters. Nor did a woman eat or chat with her sons. By 'chatting' I mean a prolonged conversation. It was not forbidden for people in these relationships to speak to one another. Nor could a man eat or joke with his sister (although chatting was permitted) or be alone with her at night. A grown man could not sleep in the same room as his father, except perhaps on a journey, nor could he wear his father's clothes while he was still alive. A grown woman might sleep in the same room as her mother, provided they were far apart.

The reason for these avoidances is usually given simply as 'shame' (*osoi*) although I have also heard it said in explanation of the father-eldest son avoidance 'If you don't have an eldest son you can't have a family', that is, it is the birth of his eldest son which gives a man status as a father. There seems to be no formalized norm of behaviour towards the *Kwasula*, but it is said that the youngest child is the parent's favourite.¹⁰ When I asked what would happen if a man was alone with his mother at night the answer given was, 'Your father would be angry.'

575 It is evident that these avoidances would limit the role of the elementary family as an associational unit. This was further limited by the institution of the men's house in which the men and boys from the age of seven or so upwards eat together. In this way, a boy was associated from childhood with the body of agnatic kinsmen from whose conversation he received much of his education in matters ranging from table manners to history.

593 The authority of a man over his grown sons does not seem to have been very marked. A father had first claim on the services of his adolescent son in the caravan trade; if his father did not need him a lad could travel with another kinsman and a grown man could trade on his own account. Nor did a father apparently control his son's access to land, since this was allocated by the village headman. There was, however, one very important service a father could perform for his son, that of ransoming him when the latter's mother's brother wished to sell him as a

¹⁰ I am not sure if the *kwasula* is the youngest child, either male or female, or the youngest child provided that he is male. I think the latter.

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slave. Once ransomed a boy could not be sold again. If, however, the father was displeased with his son's behaviour he could refuse to ransom him. When a man died, his adolescent sons would go to the household of a classificatory father and the children who did not yet 'have sense' would go with the widow to her kin, returning to their agnatic kin when they were older. 593 768

4. Analysis of the Old Kinship System

The ethnography of the Ovimbundu does show that there existed a double-descent kinship system, each individual belonging to both a local patrilineal group, and a dispersed matrilineal group, in which movable property is inherited. So great has been the impact of social change that not only have these groups disappeared but it is practically impossible to gain additional information on them by direct questions about their nature and functions. The information on kinship norms does give a somewhat clearer picture. 611 613 [422] 613 178

Within the village there was a very strong emphasis on the unity and solidarity of the men of the village. The men's house was the main social centre of the village where the men ate, received guests, and listened to cases. It was about it rather than about the person of the headman that ritual clustered. The elementary family was not the unit of domestic consumption, and it is clear, from the taboos regarding contact with women kin, and the evidence as to the social life of the man's house that there was little recreational contact between the sexes. The concept of *ondjamba*²¹ shows that the elementary family of husband, wife, and children, was morally and ritually significant, but many of the educational, nutritive, and recreational functions frequently associated with it were here attached to the men's house. 575 594 575

The strength of the agnatic ties in this society seems to have lain in the solidarity of the men of the village rather than in the patriarchal authority of fathers over sons. A son was economically independent of his father since he could trade on his own while his father was still living; the most powerful social sanction in the hands of kinsmen, that of being sold as a slave, was

²⁰ For these rituals see Hastings, pp. 73-76, and Childs, p. 39.

²¹ *Ondjamba* will be discussed more fully in the next chapter. [604]